

REPORT OF THE FREMONT SAU ORGANIZATION STUDY COMMITTEE

Introduction In March, 2005 the voters of the Fremont School District, pursuant to RSA-194-C voted to approve the creation of a Fremont SAU Planning Committee to research and analyze the question of whether the Fremont District should continue its membership in SAU 14 or to seek another form of SAU organization. This action was precipitated by the Chester and Epping School Districts placing the formation of SAU Planning Committees on their school warrants.

SAU 14, made up of the school districts of Chester, Epping and Fremont, had seen a number of developments and observations that led many residents in each community to question the value of continued membership in the SAU. This concern has intensified after two SAU studies by the Chester School District and years of effort by the Fremont School District to work with the Epping District to fund and build a new high school in Epping failed. The Fremont District voted in 2004 for a long-term tuition agreement to send its students to Sanborn Regional High School. As a result the three towns of SAU 14 now send their students to three different high schools – Chester to Pinkerton Academy, Epping to Epping High School, and Fremont to Sanborn Regional High School. This development has made coordination of K-12 curriculum and program at the SAU level very difficult. Also, over the past decade the districts have gradually assumed more responsibility for services and programs in the areas of special education and curriculum previously provided by the central office.

Over the past decade, Fremont has experienced increases in elementary student enrollment impacting the Ellis School and the loss of a receiving high school. Within the past few years significant improvements have been made including a new addition to the elementary school, a long term high school tuition agreement with Sanborn Regional, new school administration, and curriculum improvements. Overall, the Fremont District has received acceptable services from SAU 14. As the smallest member of SAU 14, Fremont would prefer to stay part of a multiple district SAU. However, it must be acknowledged that Chester and Epping residents, as well as the Epping Budget Committee, have more and more questioned the value of the services received from the central office relative to the tax burden of membership in the SAU. Both Chester and Epping have voiced dissatisfaction regarding a perceived lack of attention to their districts by the superintendent or a perceived lack of SAU services or by the cumbersome nature of operating a three-town SAU.

SAU 14 takes up nearly 400 square miles and is served by three different school boards, and governed by a joint board composed of the three school boards for a total of fifteen board members. With the increasing needs of all three school districts, inordinate amounts of time have been spent at night meetings. Scheduling meetings with SAU representation has been an issue due to the various commitments of the three districts. The SAU has been further strained by their need to develop multiple budgets for the three school districts and the SAU, the various Epping scenarios that have occurred under SB-2, the Epping Fremont Cooperative initiative, other Fremont cooperative attempts, and the SAU withdrawal plans for the two prior Chester Committees and the present plans for Chester, Epping and Fremont Committees. SAU 14 staff must supervise and track a total of six collective bargaining contracts which commits members to more evening meetings and more central office management. These time consuming operations

serve to detract from the time needed to improve the educational programs in each district. On top of this there are the increasing state and federal demands.

SAU Planning Committee During the summer of 2005, each of the three districts formed its own committee to examine continued membership in SAU 14. Fremont's Committee was made up of School Board members Peg Pinkham and Lisa Begley, Budget Committee representative Marc Wood, and Community members Mary Jo Holmes, and Nan Perry. The Committee has had two community members withdraw due to the time commitments. Superintendent Barbara Munsey served as a non-voting member of the committee.

Under RSA 194 – C: 2 III, the duties of the Fremont SAU Planning Committee have been to:

1. Study the advisability of establishing a school administrative unit, its organization, operation and control, and the advisability of contracting, maintaining and operating a school or schools for the unit.
2. Estimate any related construction and operating costs for the schools.
3. Investigate financial matters.
4. Prepare educational and fiscal analysis of the impact on the remaining districts and disposition of school administrative assets.
5. Submit a report of its findings and recommendations to school districts in the existing school administrative unit.

Investigation The Fremont SAU Planning Committee met regularly beginning August 25 through November 8, 2005. The Committee identified three possible recommendations to investigate:

1. Recommend that Fremont remain in SAU 14.
2. Recommend that Fremont form a new SAU with the Epping School District.
3. Recommend that Fremont withdraw from SAU 14 and form its own school administrative unit.
4. Recommend that Fremont withdraw from SAU 14 and join with the Sanborn Regional School District.

Members of the Committee reviewed RSA 194-C, reviewed SAU 14 history, and studied the SAU 79 budget for the Gilmanton School District, a district of similar-size to the Fremont community, as well as previous reports of school planning committees. Finally, the committee discussed the pro and con arguments related to remaining in SAU 14, forming a new SAU with another community or communities, and withdrawing from SAU and forming a single district SAU.

1. Remaining in SAU 14 was considered a viable option as Fremont had received satisfactory services at a fair cost, while also receiving the benefits of the other districts' experiences. However, it was recognized that Chester was dissatisfied with SAU 14 and that Epping had a high school needing more services. In addition, the three districts were sending their high school students to three different high schools making it difficult to coordinate. Increasing demands due to federal/state requirements and growth of the

districts have stretched SAU resources. Under these circumstances retaining administration would be difficult.

2. Forming a new SAU with the Epping School District was advantageous as Epping already had an SAU building, the geographic location was good, the districts had similar goals and demographics, and the districts have worked well together. In addition, retention of administration in a two district SAU would be more likely than the present three-district scenario. The possibility of contracting services from Epping was also considered. Disadvantages included the fact that Epping was a larger district with a high school. Fremont has also made the decision to align with the Sanborn Regional School District with the newly voted long-term tuition agreement.
3. Forming a single SAU for the Fremont School District was advantageous in that the SAU could focus on Fremont's needs only, but the cost was prohibitive. In addition the district had no office space, no staff, and no experience to draw from. The possibility of attracting a part-time superintendent was also questioned.
4. Joining SAU 17 for the Sanborn Regional School District was advantageous in that Fremont was investigating a K to 12 system with Sanborn. There was the on-going curriculum alignment, the 20-year tuition contract, the historical connection with Sanborn, and the sharing of costs. The disadvantage is that the Sanborn Regional School District is not ready at this time to pursue a cooperative for the upcoming annual meeting.

Based on this preliminary analysis, the committee voted to actively pursue remaining in SAU 14 as a three district SAU or reorganizing with the Epping School District. However, in late October the Chester and Epping SAU Planning Committees announced their intentions to withdraw from SAU 14 eliminating both of these options. The Chester and Epping decisions also included the recommendation to withdraw effective July 1, 2006.

On November 8th, the Fremont SAU Planning Committee discussed Fremont's future plans to investigate a cooperative school district and the intentions of the Chester and Epping districts. A proposed budget for an Epping SAU contracting services to the Fremont School District was received from the superintendent. The plan called for additional administrative and support staff in addition to the Epping superintendent, business manager, and support staff to meet the SAU needs of Fremont per Appendix A. Previously supplied budgets for remaining in SAU 14 and forming a single-district SAU were also reviewed. A summary of this information is shown below.

1. Remain in SAU 14 - \$171,308 (Appendix B)
2. Contract SAU services with Epping - \$202,245 (Appendix C)
3. Form a Fremont SAU - \$216,782 (Appendix D) *

* Cost does not include set up, rent, utilities or custodial services

Recommendation As a result of this discussion, the Committee voted 5-0 to recommend withdrawing from SAU 14 and contracting SAU services from the Epping School District effective July 1, 2006. This recommendation would provide Fremont with a transitional solution for the provision of SAU services while pursuing a cooperative school district. It is recognized that contracting services with the Epping School District will cost more than that of remaining in

the three district SAU 14. However, it is thought that at least one of the SAU districts will successfully withdraw and it is important for Fremont to prepare for this inevitability and do what is right for Fremont. It is important to note that the cost of forming a Fremont-only SAU would be more costly than the recommended option of contracting SAU services with Epping. A comparative analysis showing administrative and support staff as well as cost is shown in Appendix E.

Process following Recommendation By law, the Fremont Planning Committee is required to develop a plan for providing superintendent services for a proposed school administrative unit that meets all the requirements of RSA 194-C:4 and signed by a majority of the planning committee. The plan must be submitted to the Epping and Chester Districts that make up SAU 14 with Fremont, and be brought to the Fremont District for public hearing and input at least 14 days prior to submission to the State Board of Education. The plan may be revised after such hearings.

By law, the New Hampshire State Board of Education must review the proposed plan within 60 days of submission to ensure that all the services required by RSA 194-C: 4 have been met. The State Board will recommend either for or against the plan's adoption. The plan may be modified to address the State Board of Education's concerns. The plan, including the State Board's recommendation, then goes to the voters of the Fremont School District for acceptance or rejection on March 18, 2006. The Fremont School Board has selected March 18th for annual meeting as the votes for both Chester and Epping will be known.

If a 3/5th majority of voters casting ballots on March 18th vote to adopt the proposed plan, the plan is approved. Fremont will begin contracting SAU services with the Epping School District, effective July 1, 2006.

SAU Office Location The Epping Planning Committee has recommended that their SAU office remain in its present location. The Epping Planning Committee has also acknowledged that Fremont will need some assistance during the transition and has recommended that the Epping District offer SAU services to Fremont on a contractual basis. (Reference: Epping School District Analysis and Plan for Withdrawal from SAU 14)

Financial Impact to Districts As Chester and Epping have decided to withdraw from SAU 14, our fellow SAU districts have included the financial impact on their respective districts in their SAU planning reports. The financial impact to Fremont has already been addressed herein and the cost to Fremont would indeed be more than remaining in the three-district SAU 14.

Educational Impact to Districts As mentioned earlier, each of the three districts is sending their students to three different high schools. Since educational programs are driven by considerations of what standards students should meet when they graduate from high school, it would appear that the educational impact of each school district withdrawing would benefit all the school districts involved. This would apply to Fremont as the Fremont School District has voted to send their high school students to Sanborn Regional High School for the next twenty years.

Disposition of Assets As to the disposition of SAU 14 assets, there are few assets to dispose of. Office equipment such as copiers is leased and the three districts can divide computers used by the SAU equitably. The most significant asset is a \$70,000 accounting software package in which the contract was designed to allow for each individual district to continue using the software for a fee in the event of a withdrawal from the SAU. If the SAU ends the 2005-2006 fiscal year with a fund balance, these funds can be used to pay off the software package. Distribution of other funds and equipment can be decided by the SAU 14 Joint Board per the apportionment or by other agreement. As Epping School District owns the present SAU Office building, disposition of the facility is not an issue.

Public Hearing A Public Hearing on the Proposed Plan for Withdrawal from SAU 14 was held November 21, 2005 at 6:40 p.m. at the Ellis School Media Center. The following points were made by the Committee.

1. SAU 14 superintendent answers to three districts – Chester, Epping and Fremont.
2. SAU 14 has experienced significant student growth and increase in administrative duties.
3. All three districts have different needs due to their independent school systems – Epping with a K-12 system and Chester/Fremont with 1-8 systems.
4. All three districts send their high school students to three different high schools.
5. Coordination of initiatives and programs between the three districts has been an issue.
6. All three districts have SAU planning committees studying SAU services and cost.
7. In recent history SAU 14 has always had a member school district dissatisfied with SAU services.
8. Chester has formed a SAU Planning Committee three times and has petitioned to withdraw from SAU 14.
9. Epping has petitioned to withdraw from SAU 14 as their district can form their own SAU in which the district receives 100% services for the same cost as participating in SAU 14.
10. It is likely that Epping will successfully pass their plan to withdraw from SAU 14, and Fremont would end up in a SAU with Chester.
11. Fremont is presently transitioning their high school students into Sanborn Regional High School.
12. Fremont and Sanborn Regional Cooperative Planning Committees have formed a Joint Cooperative Planning Committee to investigate a K to 12 Sanborn Regional Cooperative School District with Kingston, Newton, and Fremont.
13. Fremont needs transitional SAU services pending formation of a cooperative school district.
14. Fremont is positioned to vote after Chester and Epping at this time and discussion will occur at annual meeting prior to voting.
15. In conclusion the Fremont SAU Planning Committee recommends the withdrawal of Fremont from SAU 14 and a contractual agreement for SAU services with the Epping School District effective July 1, 2006.

Two Fremont School Board Members and a Sanborn Regional School District Cooperative Planning Member attended the public hearing. The Committee was thanked for their good work as well as the Epping School District in offering to provide SAU services during Fremont's time of transition.

Copies of Plan Copies of this plan including appendices were sent to the chairperson of each of the three school districts in SAU 14. Copies were also made available at the hearing and at the schools, town library, and town hall.

NOTE: This report will also include a summary of the State Board of Education response to the plan and its appendices.

Conclusion The Fremont Planning Committee has carefully considered options regarding the future of school administrative services for Fremont and believes firmly that contracting for SAU services with the Epping School District will provide the needed services for the students of Fremont while pursuing a cooperative school district with Sanborn Regional School District. The Committee recommends that voters read the Committee's recommendation carefully, review all the information provided and vote on this question in March 2006.

Respectfully submitted,

Fremont SAU Planning Committee

Peg Pinkham
School Board Representative

Marc Wood
Budget Committee Representative

Lisa Begley
School Board Representative

Mary Jo Holmes
Community Representative

Nan Perry
Community Representative

Education came to be one of the great preoccupations, enlightenment was viewed as the greatest single opportunity to escape...Parents made untold sacrifice to secure learning for their children that they had been denied."

~ John Hope Franklin – US educator, historian "From Slavery to Freedom," 1947

When you have good, workable ideas, and when you know what to do with them, you succeed.

~ Brandon Tartikoff